

# Free college for all is a popular rallying cry, but is it realistic?

By Stateline.org, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.25.19

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Students at University of California, Berkeley block Sather Gate during a March 2010 national day of action as they demonstrate against funding cuts and tuition increases at colleges and universities. Photo: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Since 2014, Tennessee has promised free community college for young people. They simply must enroll full time, do eight hours of community service a semester and earn a "C" average.

Julius Dancy's parents could not afford to send him to a four-year college. His high school grades were not great, so he didn't qualify for scholarships.

However, 18-year-old Dancy is lucky enough to live in Tennessee. He is now in his first year at Southwest Tennessee Community College in Memphis. The state's tuition-free college program made college possible for him, he said.

At least 15 states now cover two-year or four-year college tuition for some students. Lawmakers in 23 states are floating "free college" bills this year. Several Democratic presidential candidates want to not only make college tuition-free but also eliminate student loan debt.

## Free College Tuition Is Not As Easy As It Sounds

Policymakers across the country are sparring over who should get aid, and how much. Democrats and Republicans disagree about how to approach it.

Many people want to expand free college to more students and cover more than tuition.

While Democrats tend to support the idea of free college, it is still complicated. Some are worried that program dollars flow to wealthier students and don't account for expenses such as textbooks, course fees and transportation.

Meanwhile, many Republicans worry that universal free college programs fail to prepare students for jobs. Some also warn against creating expensive new government programs.

In Michigan, Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer made an appeal to make community college tuition-free. It was not received well by the Republican-led legislature there. Senate Majority Leader Mike Shirkey said he is not sure that the high cost of college is the problem. He thinks it is important to ensure that college degrees pay off for students and lead to jobs that make money.

Whitmer's goal to ensure that 60 percent of Michigan adults have a college degree by 2030, Shirkey said, "is pretty much meaningless."

### The Tennessee Promise Was Widely Copied

Free college programs date back decades. They began to multiply in the years after the Great Recession ended, around 2011. The Great Recession was a time when many people lost their jobs. College debt soared in the years that followed. Forecasters predicted that most future jobs would require advanced training.

The Tennessee Promise attracted a lot of attention and inspired many copycat programs.

The grant for recent high school graduates covers any community college tuition and mandatory fee dollars not already covered by other grants or scholarships.

In 2015, the first year of the program, community colleges enrolled almost one-quarter more recent high school graduates.

Enrollment has also jumped in other states with similar programs.

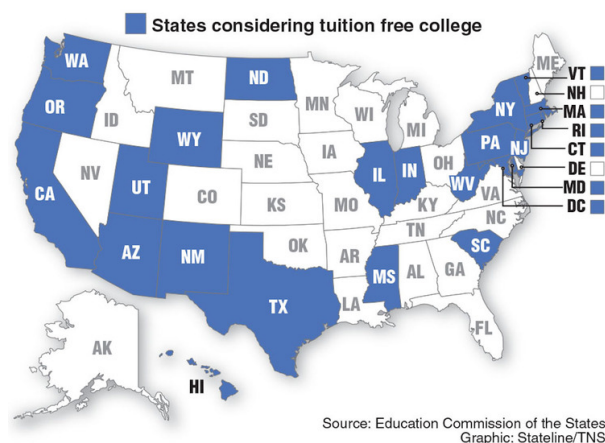
### "Promise" Seems To Be The Magic Word

Rhode Island's Promise program began in 2017. That year, the number of recent high school graduates who enrolled in community college more than doubled.

The free college concept has become popular, particularly within the Democratic Party. Some states, such as California, have even rebranded existing financial aid programs to include the word "Promise."

### Where lawmakers are considering free college

*This year, lawmakers in 23 states and Washington, D.C., have proposed legislation that would make college tuition-free for some students, or expand current programs.*



Paying for free college has been a challenge. Budget limitations this year could stop proposals to expand free college in Oregon and New Jersey.

Some Republicans argue that free college programs pass along increasingly high costs to taxpayers. Mary Clare Amselem works at the Heritage Foundation, a nonprofit research group based in Washington, D.C. She thinks the programs share an underlying problem. They do not do anything about the fact that tuition prices keep going up, she says.

She also questioned the push to encourage students to attend community college. Many have poor graduation rates. Twenty-four percent of first-time students graduate from public two-year colleges in three years. Meanwhile, 60 percent of first-time students graduate from public four-year programs in six years, according to government statistics.

Lawmakers might want to consider spending money on high school job training programs instead, Amselem said.

### **Are Low-Income Students Missing Out?**

Some left-leaning groups have criticized free college programs for spending money on wealthier students. They also say these fail to address costs of attendance beyond tuition.

Tiffany Jones is director of higher education policy at the Education Trust, a national nonprofit focused on promoting equality in education. She analyzed the 13 free college programs active in 2017. Eight, she found, used a model like Tennessee's. "That meant, obviously, that there was no financial benefit for the lowest-income students," she said.

Some programs only offer aid to low-income students, such as Maryland's, or provide Promise aid before other grants. This allows total aid to exceed tuition costs — as Oklahoma and California do. These programs promote equality by directing more aid toward students who need it most, Jones said.

Media coverage of Oregon's "free college" program can be misleading, said Juan Baez-Arevalo. He is the head of Oregon's Office of Student Access and Completion.

"It's not free," he said of the grant. The Oregon Promise program covers community college tuition but not course fees, textbooks, transportation or room and board.

### **Officials Try To Target Aid To Those In Need**

The perception that free college only helps middle-class people has made some reluctant to support the policies. In New Jersey, Democrat Governor Phil Murphy is trying to target aid to the neediest students.

The programs are also finding other ways to support students.

Krissy DeAlejandro is executive director of tnAchieves, a privately funded nonprofit group that supports the Tennessee Promise program by, among other things, training and recruiting volunteer mentors.

DeAlejandro acknowledged that more well-off students might receive more Promise money. Still, she says, lower-income students can receive more non-tuition support. For example, academic advising and coaching provided by her nonprofit are available.

Dancy, the student from Memphis, said that support for Tennessee Promise participants has helped him stay on track. He appreciates his advisers, and reminder emails and texts. When his grades fell this semester, he was instantly surrounded by adults pointing him toward tutoring resources and reminding him to stay focused.

"To me, it doesn't even feel like it's a scholarship," he said. "It feels like more of a family thing."

## Quiz

- 1 Which two of the following sentences from the article include its central ideas?
1. *At least 15 states now cover two-year or four-year college tuition for some students.*
  2. *Policymakers across the country are sparring over who should get aid, and how much.*
  3. *Forecasters predicted that most future jobs would require advanced training.*
  4. *In New Jersey, Democrat Governor Phil Murphy is trying to target aid to the neediest students.*
- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 1 and 4
- (C) 2 and 3
- (D) 3 and 4
- 2 Which statement would be MOST appropriate to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) Free college programs have been proven to be the best way to help students from all income levels.
- (B) Free college programs have become very popular in Tennessee, due to Julius Dancy's success story.
- (C) Many people want to expand free college tuition to more students, but it is a complicated issue.
- (D) Most people surveyed said they would support a presidential candidate who would provide free college.
- 3 According to the article, which of the following MOST influenced Mary Clare Amselem's criticism of free college programs?
- (A) the fact that many of the programs are supported by lawmakers
- (B) the fact that the programs do not cover costs like books and housing
- (C) the fact that many of the programs give aid to wealthier students
- (D) the fact that the programs do not address rising tuition prices
- 4 According to the article, why are some lawmakers concerned about implementing free college programs?
- (A) They feel that universal free college programs unfairly provide aid to middle class and wealthy students.
- (B) They feel that universal free college programs are expensive and do not adequately prepare students for jobs.
- (C) They feel that universal free college programs do not pay enough for textbooks, course fees and transportation.
- (D) They feel that universal free college programs fail to provide academic supports like tutoring and coaching.